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ABSTRACT

Since all preschool children do not have fully developed listening abilities, a program of musical activities is useful for teachers as a diagnostic tool and as an enjoyable way to improve children's listening skills. A five stage program, involving (1) short span listening, (2) active responses to aural stimuli, (3) creative expression, (4) exercises for developing the ability to imagine, and (5) making music in groups, is recommended as a way of increasing children's awareness of many of the skills necessary for the development of language. (Author/RH)

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'A child must be able to think and interpret as he listens and sees and maintain this activity over long periods of time to keep up with ongoing developments in the classroom.' (Hyatt, 1968)

But what is listening? (Probably one of the most neglected of the four elements of language.) And how do you think and interpret - especially over long periods of time?

Children are asked to listen - and told they're not listening! - but some children may not have the fundamental concept of listening while others may have a limited concept, being able to listen only when they can relate what they hear to what they can actually see. The effective listener would therefore appear to be able to think and interpret without visual support, supplying his own visual aid, where necessary, through imagery.

The writer has some evidence, albeit on a small scale, which suggests that the ability to visualise may not be a natural endowment.

(1) An intelligent upper- school pupil (with a spelling problem) remarked after reading Wordsworth's poem 'The Daffodils': 'What is an inward eye? I don't seem to have one.'

(2) A university student, also with a spelling problem, confessed to being astounded to discover that people went around with wee pictures in their heads.

(3) A group of young people, taking advantage of adult literacy tuition, clearly thought visual imagery a hilarious notion.

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Finding out if five-year-old children can or can not visualise is not easy, for the reception - class child has a preference for making responses he thinks will please the teacher rather than responses which

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may be nearer the truth. However, a programme of musical activities, aimed at training young children how to listen, not only acts as a diagnostic tool for the teacher, but has been found to improve listening skill quite remarkably, for the elements of music match those of language - listening, talking/singing/playing, reading, writing - and some transfer of learning may reasonably be expected.

Enjoyment is the keynote to successful learning and it is hard to find a child who shows no interest in the tuned and untuned musical instruments found in a modern infant classroom. The teacher must, of course, show the same enthusiasm for them as the children do, but sadly, a myth surrounds the word 'music' and many teachers consider it a specialised subject. The nature of the activities to be suggested, however, is such that they make few demands on the musical ability of the teacher,

Five Stage Programme

Stage I - short span listening

Valuable opportunities for language development are lost if all available musical instruments are placed in the music corner at the outset, so only one, e.g. a drum should be placed there in the first instance. The children should be encouraged to talk about its shape, size, colour, texture, weight, how played, when/why used etc. They should then take it in turn to experiment with different beaters and brushes and note changes in sound.

If a rhythm instrument is introduced first, then a pitch one should follow- e.g. a glockenspiel or chime bars and these should be observed and spoken about in the same way as was done for the drum. There are now two types to compare and a game of 'Which did you hear first ?' may be played. If drum and chime bar were the chosen instruments both should be visible to the children throughout the first part of the exercise and a second drum and chime bar should be played, hidden from view. As the child looks, he relates what he hears to what he sees. As further instruments are introduced, so, further opportunities to

listen, talk, explore, compare and discriminate will materialise and the game may be then played with an increasing number of instruments. When success at this stage is seen to be enjoyed, the next and very important step should be taken, viz. the withdrawal of visual aid. The children should hear but not see the instruments that are played. This encourages children to use visual imagery to supplant the missing instruments as they try to identify the sounds.
The activities in stage I demand only short span listening so we are now looking for ways of extending the span.

Stage 2

This stage involves the children in making active responses to aural stimuli.

(a) Listening to, and then correctly clapping a rhythm - simple rhythm first then increasing in difficulty.

(b) Listening to a question which has been said and making a suitable reply. Listening to a question which has been sung and singing a suitable reply.

(c) Listening to a short story which lends itself to the use of sound effects agreed on after a first reading of the story. Careful listening must take place in order to produce or halt the sounds at the appropriate moments. (Music Alive. McLullich 1977)

Stage 3

This stage allows the child to break away from a controlled activity to the freedom of creativity.

A chiffon scarf or length of coloured ribbon for each child gives something that can be manipulated and directed to encourage the use of imagination.

Christina Rossetti's poem about the wind makes a good starting point and it should be read and discussed with the children who should then suggest ways of producing the sound of the wind. These may be

vocal and instrumental and the children should be encouraged to think of them as music telling them what to do. 'I'm a windmill' , 'I'm a whirlpool' , 'I'm a yacht and my sail is flapping' , 'I'm a cloud blowing across the sky' , 'I'm a tree and my leaves are shaking', 'I'm great big waves on a rough sea' are just some of the roles children assume as they manipulate their chiffon or ribbon.

Stage 4

Experience in thinking about and interpreting the kinds of sounds described in the previous stages prepares the child for longer periods of listening.

Recorded music, which varies in mood and tempo e.g. Zorba's Dance, The Golliwog's Cakewalk, Sugar Plun Fairy should be played while the children listen and try to imagine what the music is telling them. No music titles should be given. The outcome of listening should be expressed in art form - painting, crayoning, collage, paper sculpture and at this stage some children may wish to write a description or narrative. The purpose of listening should be explained at the outset and the finished work discussed and admired.

Stage 5

In the final stage the child should be part of a team of music makers Here the work is specifically linked to Music Alive whose simple colour-coded accompaniment cards form the basis for group music-making. Careful listening is required in order to perform in time and tune with team members.

This discipline projects into the discursive situation where children must listen, without interruption, to one another in order to respond satisfactorily.

The stimulus for each stage has been chosen primarily to provide opportunitiesto encourage effective listening and a feature of the use of musical instruments is that the child does not have the anxiety

of feeling he is in a test situation. Many other benefits, however, accrue:-

(a) sense of rhythm improves - necessary in speaking, reading and writing.

(b) motor skills improve as many of the instruments require great precision in playing.

(c) aural awareness is sharpened, bringing help to those children who have difficulty in distinguishing between d/t p/b c/g f/v s/z

(d) practice in discrimination and recall helps with spelling, especially for those children who have to rely on auditory rather than visual imagery.

(e) physical response to creative stimuli leads to improved story- writing

It is not claimed that this programme is a panacea but it does provide stimulating opportunities for children to experience awareness of many of the skills necessary for the development of language.

N.B. This paper was punctuated by audience participation.

(a) examination of subconscious strategies often falsely assumed that these are practised by everyone.

(b) group music-making using colour-coded cards from Music Alive (McLullich, 1977. Published Oliver and Boyd, Robert Stevenson House, Edinburgh)

References.

Verse 4 The Daffodils W.Wordsworth

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

Who Has Seen the Wind? Christina Rossetti

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I
But when the trees bow down their heads
the wind is passing by.

Suggested musical instruments

Drum (with soft and hard beaters and brush)
Tambour, tambourine
Cymbal
Indian bells
Triangles (different sizes)
Wood blocks
Maracas
Castanets
Guiro
Chime bars, glockenspiel, xylophone

The addition of coconut shells proves a spur to the imagination.